The Theme of the Great War in the Publicism of V.Y. Bryusov

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Abstract

This article examines the journalistic art of the Russian symbolist Valery Bryusov during the First World War. The poet’s response to the war were not only his poems, but also numerous journalistic essays in the press, most of which were based on his personal observations as a war correspondent of the newspaper "Russian Gazette". The study was undertaken with the aim to understand how the author of these texts perceived the Great War, which sides of the war he strove to disclose and display in his journalistic works, in what way his views of the events were correlated with public opinion and the views of other members of the cultural elite of the Silver Age. The conclusion based on the undertaken textual, contextual, socio-cultural analysis is that the main content of V. Y. Bryusov’s military correspondence concerns not questions of geopolitics, strategy and tactics of the combatants but the existence of a person in the military environment. Frontline notes and essays of the Russian symbolist is a kind of artistic and journalistic anthropology of the Great War.

Keywords: V. Y. Bryusov, military journalism, history of Russian journalism, the First World War, Silver Age of Russian culture.
Introduction

Creative environment of the Silver Age of Russian culture, being apolitical, non-public, refined aesthetic, still could not be completely detached from urgent social and political problems of the tumultuous era of the early twentieth century. A. Peyman subtly commented: “For the artists and poets of the Silver Age, the battlefield was culture rather than society because culture was their responsibility; but it would be rush to conclude that culture was all that mattered to them, and that everything else but a metaphor for the battle to preserve the manual, superstructure of human endeavour” [1, p. 230-321]. One of the most significant events that affected not only the personal and creative fate of the cultural elite of the time, but also drew near the end of “belle époque” of the Silver Age, was the First World War, originally called "the Great".

The cultural elite actively responded to geopolitical cataclysm that agitated the entire Russian society in political essays, philosophical treatises, and works of art. However, not so many representatives of the intellectual and creative environment of the Silver Age really came into contact with the immediate reality of the war. Among those who could not and did not want to stand aside from the fateful events for the native country was the master of Russian symbolism, refined esthete and "aristocrat of the spirit" Valery Yakovlevich Bryusov. The poet’s response to the war were not only his poems, but also numerous journalistic essays in the press, most of which were based on his personal observations. Being beyond the military age and infinitely far away from the art of war, he completely devoted himself to literary pursuits, but with the outbreak of war decisively put aside all his former plans and became a war correspondent. V. Bryusov’s frontline notes had an impact on the public opinion, since a significant amount of the reading public perceived the Great War primarily through the eyes of essayers. However Bryusov’s military journalism is an integral part of the literary heritage of the Silver Age, in its own way revealing the nature of the world perception of its creators.

Russian Silver Age in its various manifestations is attracting sustained research attention. In particular, the history and theoretical understanding of the literary process of this cultural epoch have been reflected in scientific works [2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7]. Annotated anthology of works by Russian modernists contributes to systematization of the scientific work [8; 9], as well as a review of studies devoted to the Silver Age, which were being conducted by specialists from various fields of humanitarian knowledge [10]. Scientists are trying to get into the mindset of the cultural elite formed by specific historical conditions in which creative intellectuals existed at the turn of the XIX–XX centuries [11; 12; 13; 14]. Russian symbolism as an aesthetic phenomenon and a wildly spread cultural movement of that time, with V. Y. Bryusov being one of its’ leading representatives is being actively studied. [1; 15; 16; 17; 18; 19]. Along with fiction and criticism the object of study is journalism of the Silver Age [20; 21].

The range of scientific publications dealing with the development of Russian literature, including journalism, in its connection with the First World War, has been expanding. For a long time this topic has remained apparently unexplored. One of the first significant researches in this field was the monograph B. Hellman "Poets of Hope and Despair: The Russian Symbolists in War and Revolution (1914-1918)" [22]. The author refers to the same subject in several articles [23]. The monograph of A. I. Ivanov's "the First world war in Russian literature (1914-1918)" is devoted to a wider range of writers, not limited only to the modernists [24]. In the center of attention of the researcher was an ethical and aesthetic aspects of literary works of the wartime. The book formed the basis for the doctoral thesis of
the author [25]. The influence of the press on the mass consciousness of the Russian society in the wartime became the subject of discussion of participants of the international conference "Russian journalism and periodicals of the era of the First World War: politics and poetics," organized by the Institute of world literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 2012 in Moscow. The problem of the reflection of the Great War in journalistic works by its contemporaries, including Valery Bryusov, was analyzed in the interdisciplinary conference proceedings [26]. General cultural situation in which the literary process of the period of the First World War was developing is revealed in articles of the two-part collection of works of an international team of scientists "Russian Culture in War and Revolution, 1914-22" [27; 28]. The publication of sources equipped with scientific apparatus is a valuable aid in research work: articles about the war of a number of Russian writers of the early twentieth century, including military essays of V. Bryusov [29], as well as his letters from the front [30].

Revival of research interest to the First World War, including its humanitarian aspects (understandable due to recently past memorable date of the centenary of its beginning), led to the emergence of serious scientific results. However, one should not consider them being exhaustive, the development of culture of the Silver Age in the context of the First World War fully disclosed, and the study of literature and journalism of that period completed.

Military journalism is of scientific interest not just as a collection of written texts of a certain genre – it should be considered as a carrier of the worldview of the literary environment of the Silver Age, as a historical source, allowing to reconstruct the perception of the First World War by direct eyewitnesses of the events. Turning to the research of V. Bryusov’s activities as a war correspondent makes sense not only in terms of the analysis of narrative and compositional peculiarities of his front-line essays. It is important to try to understand how the author of these texts perceived the Great War, which of its’ sides he sought to disclose and display in his journalistic work, how his views of the events were correlated with public opinion and the views of other members of the cultural elite of the Silver Age. Aimed at this objective the study was carried out with the standpoint of general cultural-historical approach to the study of the literary process using a complex analysis of material, including textual, contextual and socio-cultural aspects.

Analysis of the material
The war that erupted in Europe in the summer of 1914, and gradually spread across numerous countries on different continents, caused a wide range of views in different layers of the Russian society, pointed out many individual philosophical and moral positions. The diversity of opinions about the war was characteristic of the intellectual-creative intelligentsia, including the cultural elite of the Silver Age. For example, N. S. Gumilev, recognized unfit for military service for health reasons, gained admission to the army and later became a George knight. S. A. Sokolov, a founder of the symbolist publishing house "Grif" was a volunteer at the front. A. A. Block who had no any bent and inclination for heroism and for the career of a military man, reacted faithfully to the appeal and participated in the construction of defensive structures in the frontal zone. M. A. Voloshin, on the contrary, did not obey the conscription order, giving the reason that his conscientious objection was strict pacifist beliefs. The society was divided into "defencists" who wanted for their country absolute victory and "defeatists", who hoped that the defeat of the Russian Empire in the war would accelerate the fall of the rotten tsarist regime. V. Y. Bryusov, who decided to become a war correspondent took an active public position in the current situation, which was the
evidence of the serious revolution in the consciousness of the poet who used to advocate the theory of "pure art" ("art for art's sake") and consistently defended the principle of the autonomy of artistic creation from political things.

V. Y. Bryusov met the news of the outbreak of war at the dacha outside Moscow, where he was restoring his health. The poet gave up the treatment and immediately returned to Moscow. The first journalistic reaction of V. Bryusov on unfolding events was the analysis of what was happening on the basis of essays coming from different regions of the world experiencing armed conflict or those ready to join. After just a few days after the war began, he mentioned the extraordinary scale that it had assumed. In a newspaper article under the stunning for that time title "World War" the author shared his alarming observation: "the European war is threatening to turn into a world war. From all continents of the globe only South America remained a simple spectator of the struggle began. Asia, Africa, North America and Australia to a greater or less degree already involved in it" [31]. Reflecting on the inner causes and the possible consequences of the global conflict, V. Y. Bryson suggested that a winning side would expand its colonial possessions at the expense of a defeated side. The summary judgment of the author has not lost its urgency up to this day and taking into account some geographical remarks sounds surprisingly contemporary: "any annexation of the smallest territory in Europe is very difficult due to historical traditions and strong national feeling of local people (it is sufficient to recall the example of Alsace and Lorraine). These issues are considered irrelevant in foreign countries, and the European powers put in common practice division of the black mainland, without regard to the inhabitants or the history of the country, carrying out new boundaries directly on the meridians and parallel circles" [31].

In a later published V. Bryusov’s journal article the course of military operations outside Europe was discussed extensively. A detailed analysis of combat operations and clashes led the author to an optimistic conclusion: despite huge cash investment in the creation of the German Navy, "we have to recognize that the marine and colonial power of Germany now, at the beginning of the War has been shaken to its core, if not broken altogether". The defeat of its naval forces by the British – "the first decisive and very sensitive thing that struck Germany. No matter how events will develop further, Germany will not soon recover from that impact « [32, p. 141]. Confidence in the preponderance of anti-German forces expressed by the author had nothing to do with propaganda and cheer patriotic hoopla. These were sustained judgments on the nature and prospects of what was happening, based on the analysis of current military-political realities.

V. Y. Bryusov remained an armchair analyst not for a long time. In mid-August 1914 he served on the Western front as a war correspondent of the newspaper "Russian Gazette". For the nine months spent there, he sent to his editorial bureau and other print editions over 80 essays in which he narrated about what he saw with his own eyes and heard from the soldiers and the civilian inhabitants caught in the thick of the war. V. Y. Bryusov did not manage to get the official status of a war correspondent and the appropriate accreditation, but this didn't stop him to go to the battlefields at his own risk, although it considerably impeded later his work.

The war correspondent started sharing with readers his personal impressions just with on the go. In the train moving to fighting Poland, according to him, all conversations were only about the war. In the correspondence to "the Way to the West," he noted "And Belorussia peasants in their white scrolls, and Jews in their long frock-coats, and reserve officers, traveling to their military units, and the Polish landowners, majestic and proud, – all are only interested in the latest news from the border and from abroad. They speak different
languages and in different languages, but all equally sober look at the events, do not flatter themselves with excessive hope, but not for a moment lose faith in success" [29, p. 264].

The same quiet people’s confidence was found by V. Y. Bryusov upon his arrival to Poland, about what he essayed in a number of newspaper notices (" In Vilna", "Passing through Warsaw", "In Warsaw hospitals" and others). In the cities not occupied by the enemy there was an ordinary peaceful life with elegant crowds of people in the streets, music in the gardens, theatres and the cinema halls filled with an audience, coffee shops, flooding with electric lights... However, the vicinity of the war was keenly felt. Newspapers and military essays were in great demand. The talk of war was led at each table in the café. The refugees from enemy occupied areas in the city. Residents collected donations for the wounded and soldiers’ families. Volunteers served free of charge in hospitals and infirmaries. All of this clearly showed the growing sense of national unity. V. Y. Bryusov found the explanation of the close solidarity of the people not only in the desire of the polish people to resist the Germans – an old national enemy, but in general the rise of the spirit of the Slavic people, covering the whole Russia, including Poland, to which had retreated the previous hostility between the Poles and Russians [29, p. 265-274].

In his Warsaw office of V. Y. Bryusov appeared infrequently, only to send another correspondence. He was constantly on the move through Poland, Galicia and East Prussia, visiting battlefields and areas, in which the enemy troops were forced out in course of attacks. Collecting information for their journalistic essays, he wrote not only his own observations, but also those of numerous testimonies of eyewitnesses and direct participants of military events. Herewith in the center of attention of the essayer was not so much the situation at the frontlines but the state of the man in the war – mood, characters, actions and fates of people caught in inhuman conditions. This approach to the coverage of armed conflict was characteristic of all the Silver Age creators. According to his neo-romantic worldview, the cultural elite sought to understand the inner spiritual meaning of the war. The cultural elite did not go deep into the issues related to political, economic and social causes of the world confrontation, preferring to meditate on its deep non-material origins, which according to the creators of the Silver Age lay in cultural (or rather anti-cultural) evolution of Germany "from Kant to Krupp" [33].

In his correspondence V. Y. Bryusov described not only the soldiers’ everyday life, military adventures and heroic exploits, which were described in the essays "Trips to the leading positions" [29, p. 462-471], "in Passing" [29, p. 381-388, 457-462, 482-492], "Fantasy of the war" [29, p. 344-350], "the Staff Captain Gurdov" [29, p. 496-498] and many other materials. He had the opportunity to see many disasters which civilians of Poland suffered: unemployment and hunger in cities, refugees who were forced to sit whole camps in the forests, plundered and burned estates, regular aerial bombardments of the Polish territory, that he called "new German filth". This side of the war was revealed, in particular, in the correspondences "the Germans in Warsaw" [29, p. 309-311], "Unemployment in Poland" [29, p. 289-291], "Trip to Pultusk" [29, p. 281-285].

The author heard from witnesses and told his readers about the trials of people under enemy occupation in the essays "Clouds of Smoke" [29, p. 367-369], "Night in the dead city" [29, p. 358-362], about the failure of the German command to organize among the Poles anti-Russian movement described in the article "About the "falcons"" [29, pp. 362-367]. His impressions of the trip in the districts of Galicia being at that time under power of Russian troops were described in the series of essays "From Warsaw to Jaroslaw" [29, p. 288-289, 291-303, 305-308]. According to the correspondent, the local population met Russian soldiers
warmly, with confidence, as deliverers from the Austrian warriors who had stirred outrage in the Slavic lands – not only in Poland but also on the territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Despite their Austrian citizenship, the Galicians spoke of the Austrians as outsiders. Absolutely different situation had been established on the German territory. According to the material "One hundred and Fifty miles in East Prussia", the local German population tried to leave their homes on approaching of Russian troops. If they had not succeed, the Germans strove hard to harm Russians: unfolded guerrilla warfare, shot in the back, tried to stab sleeping soldiers during the night, led the enemy into an impassable swamps, treacherously proposing to help as guides [29, pp. 274-277].

Frontline notes of V. Bryusov brightly outlined the image of the enemy. In the article "At the Northern front," he compared the nature of the battles on the southern and northern directions of the struggle, and concluded: "while the Austrians often give up entire subdivisions the Prussians put weapons only in the most extreme conditions. They prefer death to defeat and captivity" [29, p. 314]. The author noted that the Germans were distinguished with incomparable courage, tenacity and at the same time, extreme cruelty not only to the armed enemy, but also to unarmed peaceful people in the conquered lands. If the Austrians made the destruction of civilian objects only in the heat of battle, the Germans deliberately and methodically destroyed what they could not take out of vacated areas and treated the locals in a cynical, inhuman way [29, pp. 311-318]. In the essay "Lead from under Sawley" the journalist in a very depressing mood transmitted the conversation with the Russian soldier who had testified to their usual atrocities: "Finishing off the wounded, a systematic bombardment of the Red Cross Organization, all kinds of brutality against civilians, the use of exploding bullets and bayonets-saws – all of these we have, under Salami, done by the Germans day after day" [29, p. 554].

Areas of direct battles produced on Bryusov the heaviest impression. In The article "The battlefield" from the series "After the victory" he described a horrific picture: the earth, torn up by shells and trenches, strewn with countless empty shell casings, overfilled with corpses of men and horses mixed with mountains of booty, flocks of crows over them, hastily hewn crosses on communal graves scattered nearby... The graves gave just the most curmudgeonly information about the fallen heroes, "but no one wordy epitaphs at luxury cemeteries, laden with artistic marble mausoleums and lush, stir much more less than these simple, harsh words on wooden crosses, lost in the field" [29, p. 319]. V. Y. Bryusov carefully kept the letters of killed German soldiers collected on the battlefield, believing that they would help to better understand about the people who perhaps against their will, were enemies of Russia. In the article "Letters from Enemies and to Enemies", he introduced them to his readers, saying: "Through these letters one can see the German soul and German life of our days without any reserve and without any embellishment" [29, p. 374]. These letters in journalistic transfer of V. Bryusov are perceived as a sad symbol of humanity desecrated by the war. The bitter discovery of the poet was the turn of the war into the ordinary, usual human existence. In the essay "Two Fronts," he wrote: "the grand and monstrous here has been becoming a routine; death is something ordinary; a wonderful thing is a phenomenon that we see every day. It is very likely that later, when the war ends, the participants will be amazed how they got strength and spirit to endure this single, unprecedented in the world struggle, and not only endure, but to endure it day in and day out, for weeks and months..." [29, p. 482].
Conclusion

V. Y. Bryusov was on the theater of the war in its initial period, before the Russian army suffered the first severe defeats. In 1915 the rules of the secondment of war correspondents to the front were toughened, therefore he could not continue his journalistic activity. His frontline correspondence, of course, did not capture the essence of military events and processes. These texts bear the imprint of the subjective perception of the author, besides they inevitably pursued propaganda goals and experienced the interference of censorship. Nevertheless, the journalistic writings of the poet of wartime are of great interest as a document of the epoch and literary monument. This reportorial language multiplies the emotional shock of the reader from the facts which are sealed in dry lines of V. Bryusov’s frontline essays.

Valery Yakovlevich Bryusov was neither a pacifist nor a militarist, nor a Hooray-patriot, nor a nationalist traitor. He just served to his country in difficult times in the way he could, considering it as an immutable law for himself to be faithful to the Fatherland. Bryusov’s military journalism in no less degree than his poetry, fiction, critical and theoretical articles reveals the style of thinking of Russian cultural elite of the early twentieth century. Despite the diversity of ethical viewpoints which certain thinkers and artists followed, with all their divergent views on participation of Russia in the global armed confrontation, all the Silver Age creators shared a common perception of the Great War primarily as a cultural phenomenon, as a conflict not so much of the warring states and their armies, but as that of different civilizations and their inherent value systems. Therefore the main content of V. Y. Bryusov’s military correspondence refers not to the questions of geopolitics, strategy and tactics of the combatants but to the existence of a person in the military environment. The frontline notes and essays of the Russian symbolist are a kind of artistic and journalistic anthropology of the Great War.
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